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THE PENTAGON'S TWILIGHT ZONE

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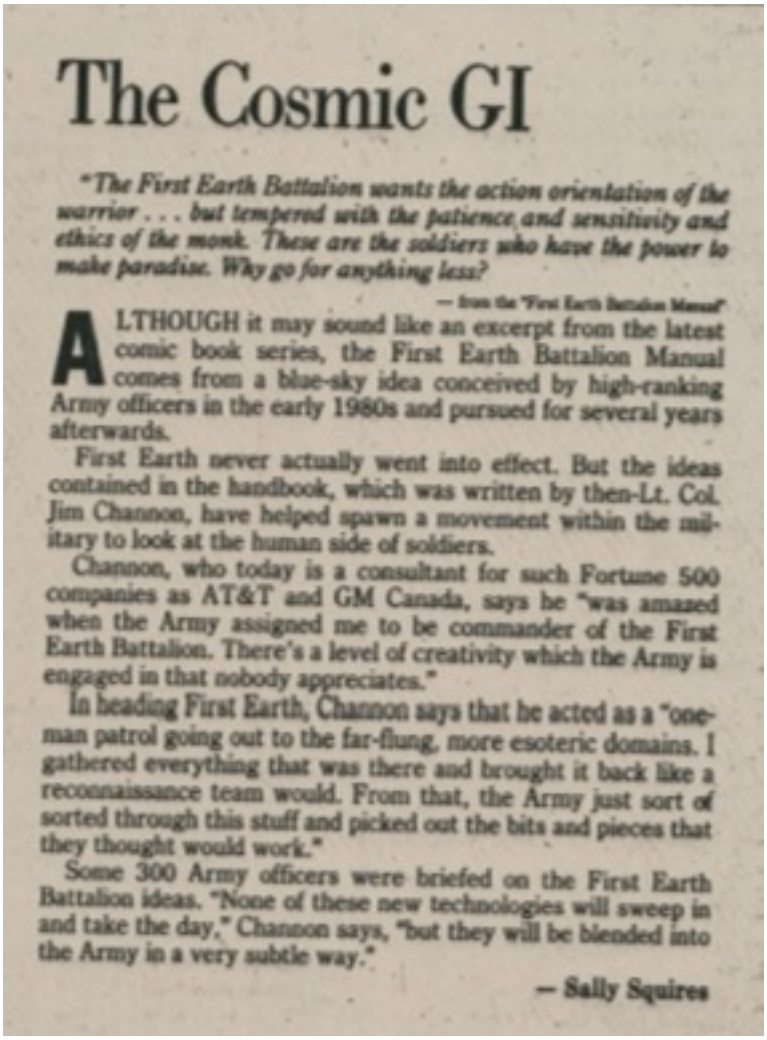
Every week in "Outposts," Outlook examines contemporary ideas that are changing our lives and expanding our intellectual frontiers. This week, Sally Squires writes about research into military and intelligence use of parapsychology and related "new age" phenomena. Squires is a reporter for the health section of The Washington Post.

THE MILITARY
The Pentagon's Twilight Zone



The Cosmic GI

"The First Earth Battalion wants the action orientation of the warrior . . . but tempered with the patience and sensitivity and ethics of the monk. These are the soldiers who have the power to make paradise. Why go for anything less?

— from the "First Earth Battalion Manual"

ALTHOUGH it may sound like an excerpt from the latest comic book series, the First Earth Battalion Manual comes from a blue-sky idea conceived by high-ranking Army officers in the early 1980s and pursued for several years afterwards.

First Earth never actually went into effect. But the ideas contained in the handbook, which was written by then-Lt. Col. Jim Channon, have helped spawn a movement within the military to look at the human side of soldiers.

Channon, who today is a consultant for such Fortune 500 companies as AT&T and GM Canada, says he "was amazed when the Army assigned me to be commander of the First Earth Battalion. There's a level of creativity which the Army is engaged in that nobody appreciates."

In heading First Earth, Channon says that he acted as a "one-man patrol going out to the far-flung, more esoteric domains. I gathered everything that was there and brought it back like a reconnaissance team would. From that, the Army just sort of sorted through this stuff and picked out the bits and pieces that they thought would work."

Some 300 Army officers were briefed on the First Earth Battalion ideas. "None of these new technologies will sweep in and take the day," Channon says, "but they will be blended into the Army in a very subtle way."

— Sally Squires

WHEN ITALIAN terrorists known as the Red Brigades kidnaped U.S. Army Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier on Dec. 17, 1981, they set in motion a series of unusual events -- even by terrorism standards.

Dozier's abduction from his home in Verona launched the largest manhunt in Italy's history, and culminated six weeks later in his rescue in an apartment in Padua.

But while Italian security and police forces scoured the country for Dozier, the U.S. Army was trying its own ways of finding the general. Psychics. Seers. Clairvoyance. The Army wanted him back and was willing to try almost anything.

Using a technique known as "remote viewing," the psychics thought they could find Dozier in their minds and direct security forces to his location.

One seer arrived in Italy wearing long, flowing saffron-colored robes, much to the consternation of American officials. According to a source who was involved, the psychic asked the startled State Department employee who met him at the airport to take him to the apartment where Dozier had been captured and beaten so that he could get a better "reading" of where the general might be.

The use of psychics proved unsuccessful -- and it rankled U.S. intelligence agencies, who were annoyed at having to operate with the psychics underfoot -- but it is only one example of the Army's willingness to try unusual avenues to accomplish a difficult job.

In this so-called New Age, in which Shirley MacLaine speaks nonchalantly about her other lives, people tout the power of the pyramid and high-ranking U.S. military officers relax in Esalen hot tubs with their Soviet counterparts, many people say that it is not even unusual that the military should be looking at varied ways to enhance human performance.

"Can areas of emerging, nontraditional psychology offer the American soldier an advantage over his adversary?" asked Gen. Marshall R. Thurman, then deputy chief of staff for personnel, in a Nov. 5, 1982, memorandum to the principal deputy assistant secretary of the army. "These include such areas as: accelerated learning, inferential focus, previsualization, psychokinetics and biokinetics, remote viewing, biophysical stress prevention, etc. Do any of these areas hold potential value to the Army?"

The Army has tried to find out.

Uncle Sam's Jedi Warriors

In 1984, the U.S. military launched a five-month experiment called Project Jedi (named after the Star Wars knights who were able to use "the Force" to perform unusual feats, including using a weapon blindfolded). It tested the use of neurolinguistic programming, or NLP, as a new way of teaching recruits how to shoot .45 caliber pistols. NLP is described in Project Jedi as "a specific discipline developed to model human excellence."

In Project Jedi, the Army carefully dissected the way three expert marksmen behaved during shooting. Their physical moves on the pistol range were carefully documented, and so were their thoughts as they fired. They were asked: When you shoot, what are you saying to yourself?

The researchers found, for example, that if they required the marksmen to hum "Mary Had a Little Lamb," while they shot, their performance dropped significantly. After gathering all this information, an independent contractor developed an experimental training course based on the expert marksmen's model.

Twenty-three recruits were then chosen. Some were trained the conventional way, while the others learned how to shoot from the experimental training course. Training time was reduced -- almost by half -- for the experimental group, although critics within the Army also point to some important flaws in the experiment, including different weather and lighting conditions for the two groups and use of different firing ranges and instructors -- all of which could skew the results.

When tested for marksmanship, eight of the 11 recruits who were trained using conventional pistol instruction qualified for shooting. Everyone in the experimental group qualified. But the groups were so small that the difference was not deemed statistically significant.

In 1985, the Army conducted a study of foreign-language instruction. Forty junior enlisted Army personnel were randomly placed into two groups to learn Russian. Half the group went into the conventional language course taught by Army instructors. The other half went into a "Suggestopedia" group, where they were taught not in a classroom, but in a pleasant living room-lounge.

Class sessions for the experimental group began with stretching exercises to promote physical relaxation. The class engaged in mental relaxation exercises and breathing techniques and then used "guided imagery" (Remember how you felt when you took your best English test? Who was your teacher? How did your stomach feel?) to enhance performance. After instruction in the day's Russian lesson, the Suggestopedia class reviewed material while gentle, soothing music played in the background.

But nyet was the bottom line. Despite these devices to make learning easier, Suggestopedia "neither accelerated learning nor resulted in more overall positive attitudes in students when compared to the standard" course, Army researchers found.

In 1985, the Army also conducted a study of peak performance in sports. Led by James L. Fobes of the U.S. Army Research Institute Field Unit in Monterey, Calif., the researchers concluded that teaching people to regulate certain brain chemicals could be helpful for soldiers. In particular, they sought ways to control the levels of endorphins, the chemicals that are thought to produce the "runner's high."

The CIA, NSA and ESP

The Army's interest in endorphins, meditation, the paranormal and other out-of-the-ordinary means of improving performance is nothing new. For the past quarter century, branches of the military and the intelligence communities have looked into these controversial fields. In 1952, for example, Dr. J.B. Rhine -- considered the dean of American parapsychology -- conducted extrasensory perception (ESP) tests for the Army. Ten years later, Air Force scientists tested college women for ESP.

And in the 1970s, officers of the CIA and the National Security Agency participated in experiments to see if certain people have psychic abilities. Run by the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), the study tested whether a psychic named Ingo Swann and a businessman named Pat Price could describe distant locations merely by knowing which geographic coordinates to "look at." If it worked, the intelligence services would have the perfect spy -- an agent who could wander the world undetected (actually, without even being there). Whether such mind's-eye-spying can work remains a matter of debate.

The trouble with remote viewing, clairvoyance, sleep learning, guided imagery and other unconventional ways of enhancing human performance is that the scientific proof to support them has always been controversial and slippery. Critics charge that most of the scientific studies have flaws, making their findings questionable at best, and they argue that until there is an adequate scientific theory about why these phenomena exist, they will be impossible to understand. But proponents point to the large amount of anecdotal evidence for the existence of some of these phenomena, particularly ESP, which they say can't be explained by other reasons.

There has also been concern among the military and the intelligence circles that the Soviets might be moving ahead in the development of psychic abilities. These concerns were fueled by reports from Soviet defectors of extensive research into parapsychology. According to these reports, the Russians were able to influence the behavior of others, alter emotions or health and knock people out or kill them through mental telepathy.

A report by the Defense Intelligence Agency notes that Soviet tests of parapsychology "included sending to the recipient the anxiety associated with suffocation and the sensation of a dizzying blow to the head . . . . Some Western followers of psychic phenomena research are concerned. . . with the detrimental effects of subliminal perception techniques being targeted against U.S. or allied personnel in nuclear missile silos. The subliminal message could be 'carried' by television signals or by telepathic means."

Some of the Army's more recent interest in unusual means of enhancing performance date from the First Earth Battalion, a proposal for a special type of unit made up of warrior-monks. The First Earth Battalion itself originated from the human potential movement popular in California in the 1960s and from the Army's soul-searching in the wake of the Vietnam War. Tired and disheartened, the Army put out the word that it was seeking a new way of training and motivating soldiers. That call led many different groups to propose alternative forms of training -- no matter how bizarre they might seem.

A schism emerged between factions in the military whose primary interest was high-tech machines and those who preferred developing the human side of the military. The authors of the First Earth Battalion plan envisioned a warrior-monk soldier who -- by mastering ESP, leaving his body at will, levitation, psychic healing and walking through walls -- would be a kind of super soldier.

In 1981, Lt. Col. Jim Channon of the Army's High Tech Light Division at Ft. Lewis, Wash., wrote in a handbook for the First Earth Battalion that "the current balance in R-and-D funding allocates 99 percent of the total R-and-D budget to machine systems and less than 1 percent to human system development. This formula, if projected to the year 2000, will give us a 20-circuit tank operated by a two-circuit soldier."

Channon and other authors of the First Earth Battalion were part of the Delta Force, a loosely knit cadre of 300 officers who coined the Army's public relations motto: "Be All You Can Be." The Delta Force (unrelated to the antiterrorism unit with the same name) was formed and named by Gen. Donn Starry, then a four-star general in charge of the Army's Training and Doctrine Command. Starry concluded that as the U.S. and the Soviet Union came closer to being equal in high-tech equipment, the difference -- or delta -- in the superpowers' armies would come down to the way soldiers performed.

The Search for Data

But meanwhile, there was no comprehensive look at parapsychology or any of these other techniques. There was no proven scientific evidence to show that they existed, let alone might be harassed for the Army of the future, and no clear review that would help place what little was known about these techniques in perspective.

To solve that problem -- and to offer some guidance to the disparate groups interested in these areas within the military, the Army commissioned a two-year, $425,000 report from the National Research Council -- an arm of the well-respected National Academy of Sciences. Among the wide range of topics reviewed by the NRC committee were stress management, biofeedback, accelerated learning, and such paranormal phenomenona as psychokinesis (the ability to physically move things with the mind), ESP and remote viewing.

The NRC report, called "Enhancing Human Performance," was released on Dec. 8 and concluded that most of these unconventional techniques were "scientifically unsupported."

But the NRC report did find that sleep learning, guided imagery (in which a task is rehearsed mentally before it is physically performed) and "super learning" programs could be helpful for military training. While the report found little evidence to suggest that super learning or accelerated learning works because of its innovative components, the holistic approach it provides may be beneficial, the NRC committee found. The report advised that the Army identify which components of accelerated learning are most important and how they could be best integrated for military use.

Exactly what the Pentagon will do with the NRC recommendations is still undecided. Some of the top level brass, including Gen. Thurman, have only recently been briefed on the report's findings. Since many of the NRC recommendations deal with basic research, the Army expects to fund more studies in these areas.

One use of mental rehearsal could be in the manufacture of anti-tank missiles, which requires some fine motor skills that might be enhanced by having technicians rehearse their tasks in their minds before they ever thread a wire.

The trick will be for the Army to sift out what is worth following and what is not, and to do that on the $200,000 annual budget currently allocated for this area. "If there were a 200 percent gain in performance {with some of these techniques}, I would probably have people banging down the door, saying, 'Why aren't we trying it?' " says Edgar Johnson, technical director of the Army Research Institute. "But the opposite is true. Lots of data shows that this doesn't work. Our job is really to put together the scientific evidence."